

# Female Labor Leaders on Work and Wages



MISS AGNES NESTOR, PRESIDENT INTERNATIONAL GLOVE WORKERS OF AMERICA.

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WASHINGTON, May 12.—(Special Correspondence of The Bee.)—  
 "What should women do to help their sex as to labor matters?"  
 "Are trades unions a good thing for women?"  
 "Do they not tend to unsex them—make them masculine?"  
 "Will women stand by their union in strikes?"  
 "What should be done with the nonunion girl?"  
 "Do you believe in the closed shop?"  
 "What has your union done for women in your trade?"  
 "Will women ever have the same pay and hours as men?"  
 "How far will women's trades unions extend—to factories, to clerks, to typewriters, servant girls?"

In this letter I give you answers to the above questions which I have just received from some of the most prominent of the women labor leaders of the United States. Few people realize how rapidly the organized woman worker is invading our industrial life. She controls twenty-six different trades in Chicago, and in that city alone numbers 35,000 members. She is to be found in all of our factory centers, and she will soon be as many as are the Russian soldiers in Manchuria. There are now trades unions in nearly every branch of woman's work, and many of the men's unions are admitting women members. In Chicago even the scrubwomen have a union.

The sausage girls, who work in the packing factories are organized, and there are unions of laundresses, candy workers, telephone girls, horseshoe nail makers, foundry girls, paper box makers and even school teachers. Indeed, the Women School Teachers' union of Chicago embraces more than 3,000 public school teachers. They have an organization which has fought the big corporations, which has carried its wrongs into the courts and has made the city increase its salaries. A leader of this union is Miss Margaret Haley, who gave as her excuse for not immediately answering my questions that she was aiding in the conduct of the suit of the Chicago Teachers' federation in the courts.

One of the fast growing women's organizations of the United States is the Union of Lady Retail Clerks. Its members are found in most of our big department stores. There are 1,600 of them in Chicago alone, and they have locals in nearly all the large cities. I have a letter before me from Miss Emma Lamphere, the general organizer of this union. She has traveled all over the country, and is well-known everywhere in labor circles. She says:

"I believe that trades unions are a good thing for women, and that they are absolutely necessary to their business and industrial success. This is especially so as regards retail clerks. The female help in most stores is uncertain. There is so much floating help—here today and gone tomorrow—that it is very annoying to the merchant and unsettling to the employes. Many of our saleswomen work only for pin money, thereby keeping out others who are compelled to depend upon their own resources for a living. It is necessary that a saleswoman should have good, up-to-date clothes, and she must have a good salary to pay for them, otherwise she must steal or secure money in other ways. Indeed, hundreds of young girls go to ruin yearly through the low salaries paid by the retail merchants of this city of Chicago. I therefore say that every woman should help in the cause of organized labor. It is by this means that we can raise wages and secure fixed employment, and by these means only,



MISS MARGARET HALEY, A LEADER OF CHICAGO'S FEDERATION OF SCHOOL TEACHERS.

"You ask what the retail clerks have done. Through our union we have reduced our hours of labor from fourteen and sixteen hours per day to ten hours, and in some places to eight and nine. We have secured fixed legal holidays, and in some cities a weekly half holiday during July and August. We have cared for our sick and buried our dead.

"As to wages, the woman retail clerk receives from \$2.50 to \$3.50 per week. About 80 per cent of our saleswomen are getting less than \$7 per week and 50 per cent less than that.

"You ask whether trades unions unsex women and make them masculine. I don't think so. If they are unsexed it is from the lack of respect that men have for them since they have entered the field of labor. They look upon us as competitors, and do not remember that we are an absolute necessity, and that if we withdraw from the field an enormous amount of foreign labor would have to be brought in to do our work. The woman now takes her own chances in all public places. She has to fight for her seat in the street car and man fights against her for it. Is it any wonder that such battles have a tendency to make her appear masculine?"

"Will women ever receive the same wages as men? That time is far distant, but it will come. It has come in some crafts. In union printing offices women typesetters are paid the same as men. In union cigar factories women are paid by the union scale, and it is so in some other branches of union labor.

"As to strikes, women make excellent strikers. They will do and dare more than the men. They are more determined and more persistent. I believe in reserving the right to strike, and that the strike serves as a school in which both employer and employe learn to know and appreciate each other better. I believe in the boycott as one of the best weapons of the trade unions, and that without it but few battles could be won."

My next letter is from Boston. It is written by Miss Anna Bowen, the head of the women cigar strippers of that city. She says:

"Women can do much to help their sex in labor matters. They should demand union cards from the saleswomen of whom they make their purchases, and they should insist that all goods bought by them have union labels. If the women of the country would do this they would elevate their sex more rapidly than by any other method. If they will demand the union label upon all goods they buy they will compel every factory to obtain that label, and this means that the factory will pay fair wages, give fair hours and establish good working conditions for its hands. By demanding the union card they will make it so that every woman clerk must belong to the union, and the result will be that 95 per cent of our women workers will get higher wages for shorter hours, and that under better sanitary conditions.

"Do trade unions make women masculine? Certainly not; why should they? They tend to make women practical, and show them that their sex does not protect them from the greed of an unfair employer. They teach them that they must organize to protect their own interests.

"What is the aim of women's trades unions?"

"The same aim as that of other trades unions—the betterment of our conditions. We want more pay and less hours of labor. We want better conditions of work, and by our union we secure them. In some of the factories we now work fifty-five hours per week, in others fifty-three and in some the girls have a half holiday every Saturday the year round. Our wages are nowhere less than \$5 per week, and upon piecework the girl cigar strippers make from \$7 to \$12 per week."

"Will the time come when women will receive the same pay as the men?"

"Yes, just as soon as they realize that they must adopt the same methods to get it. The advantages men have are only those which they have been able to de-



MISS EMMA STEGHAGEN OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE WOMAN'S BOOT AND SHOE WORKERS' UNION.

mand. When women are organized as the men they will secure the same advantages. At present the women cigar makers receive the same wages as the men. The same is true in many other trades where unionism prevails.

"I think the women stand by their demands in strikes as steadfastly as the men. This is shown by their actions in the recent strikes at Fall River, Lawrence, Gloversville and in the garment working trades, and also in the shoe workers' strike of Lynn, Marlboro' and Haverhill. I do not believe in strikes except when they are absolutely necessary, and think every possible means toward an amicable settlement should be made. I do believe in the boycott in all cases where an employer threatens to lower the standard of labor in a given industry, and think it the duty of the whole people to boycott such employers.

"You ask me what organized labor has done for my trade? It has raised the wages from 10 to 12 per cent, has bettered our working conditions and has reduced the hours of labor one hour per day, with a Saturday half holiday during the summer months. It has raised the self-respect of the working girl by making her feel that she is something more than a mere working machine, and that she has an influence in fixing the conditions under which she works. This has been to the mutual advantage of both employer and employe."

"Will trades unions eventually prevail among our clerks, typewriters and servant girls?"

"Yes, they have already extended to clerks and typewriters. The trades union is big enough, broad enough and liberal enough to cover all classes of labor irrespective of its nature."

Miss Vida Scudder of Wellesley college is president of the Boston Woman's Union Label league. She is a bright woman intellectually and much interested in woman's work. She writes:

"The Boston Woman's Union Label league is composed of women who may or may not belong to trades unions, but who feel it their duty, as consumers, to patronize union-made goods. They believe the label to be the most effective means we have of extending practical loyalty to the great principle which is revolutionizing modern industry. This principle they hold to be that the primary consideration in industry is the welfare of the producer; and that only when this welfare is adequately protected may we rightfully aim at cheapness or quality of product. Organized labor in America is the most important agent which is pressing practically toward the enforcement of this vital principle; and, therefore, toward a social order more stable, democratic and just than that which we at present enjoy."

As to trades unions, Miss Scudder writes: "Trades unions are certainly a good thing for women if they are a good thing for men; and I believe that women can help to improve the industrial condition of their sex more effectively by entering the ranks of organized labor than in any other way. To belong to a trades union 'unsexes' a woman no more than to belong to one of the women's clubs popular among the privileged class. Indeed, it strengthens more directly a high feminine ideal, inasmuch as the primary aim of the woman's club is usually intellectual self-culture, while the primary aim of the trades union is ethical and humane. Nothing more enlarges the sympathies and uplifts the desires of a working woman than to belong to the right kind of a trades union, and to learn to look beyond the personal advantage of the moment to the permanent welfare of all her comrades in labor."

The Boot and Shoe Workers' union is found in many parts of the country. It numbers thousands and is especially strong in the west. I have a letter before me from Miss Emma Steghagen of the executive board of this union. It is dated Chicago. She says that the Woman's Label league is a great help to the union, as its



MISS EMMA LAMPHERE, CHIEF ORGANIZER OF THE LADIES' RETAIL CLERKS' UNION.

members are pledged to buy none but union stamped shoes, and all other commodities which bear the union label. She writes that this league is national in its scope, and that its mission is to educate trades union men's wives, women workers and club women up to the standard of unionism. This league demands the union label on every purchase and is helping women and children workers to better conditions.

Miss Steghagen says that the Boot and Shoe Workers' union has a woman in the field whose duty it is to organize the women of the trade, and also to work for the union label. This organization pays \$5 per week sick benefits, \$5 a week to every one of its members on a strike and from \$50 to \$100 in case of death. She says that her union has but few strikes, and that most of its troubles are settled by arbitration.

As to women's trades unions, Miss Steghagen writes that their objects are a rational number of working hours, fair wages and the elimination of child labor. She says that in some parts of the country the shoe factories work their hands nine hours per day and in others ten. Piecework is most common, and \$10 a week is considered a medium wage for experienced workers. In her trade the hours are the same for women as for men, and some women earn quite as much as the men. She thinks woman a good striker, but advises strikes only as a last resort. She says that organization has greatly benefited her trade. She believes that women's unions will steadily grow, and that in time they will cover every branch of woman's work, even to the servant girl. About 30 per cent of the boot and shoe workers are women.

Among the most interesting of the women's trades unions is that of the glove workers. They have branches in Gloversville, N. Y.; in Chicago and in other glove-making centers. As to this union, I have a letter from Miss Agnes Nestor, a member of the executive board of the International Glove Workers' union of America, from which I abstract the following:

"Glove making consists of fine work and heavy work. Most of the fine work is on kid gloves, which are made in the east and chiefly at Gloversville, N. Y. This work requires considerable skill, and it pays well. It is done by the piece, and the wages depend upon the speed of the worker. The heavy work includes the making of gloves of horsehide, calfskin, buckskin, etc. This is mainly done in the west, and is divided up into different crafts. There is one branch known as 'closing,' which is most difficult to learn, and which pays best, the girls receiving 30 cents an hour for it. Men receive the same wages."

Miss Nestor writes that her trades union has done much for the glove workers of Chicago. The union there has been organized only two years, and it has already secured the "closed shop" and the Saturday half holiday during the summer months. It has abolished the system of paying 50 cents per week per operator for the use of steam power, and has gained other things. The same advantages have been secured in other parts of the country.

Miss Nestor says that it is as necessary for a woman to belong to a trades union as it is for a man, and that it does not unsex woman nor make her masculine. She writes:

"We will keep our womanly dignity through it all. We now have our own locals. We transact our own business and we have shown that we can be business-like as well as the men. We are sure that the time will come when women will have the same hours of work as men, and when they will receive the same pay for the same work performed."

FRANK G. CARPENTER.